

DIGITAL SOULS AND VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES:

STORYTELLING IN THE MODERN WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Physically dispersed individuals can now come together, thanks to global connectivity. Digitalera affords us virtual communities, which connects us easily without any hassles where we are plugged in and unplugged easily. These digital utopias offer the new generation with a possibility of enjoying social life through a multimodal digital connectivity without having to follow the expected procedures of societal norms. The past decade saw a rise in the digital publishing arena, where writers and readers took matters into their own hands and unlocked the possibility of open digital platforms. These platforms, gave writers tremendous freedom to publish their works online, and also to interact with their reader's and fellow writers as well. The Advanced technology affords online users with enough applications and a rapid means of transmission of data. These networks become the site for social exchange among teenagers and young adults. Earlier there was nothing more important than the text or the story. The text held the power to influence and transform the minds of readers. This style of reading and has undergone a massive change, where the text or the story is enhanced by graphics, animation, videos and sounds. In some cases, the responses of the enthusiasts and followers also become the basis of major revisions by the authors. This digital interactivity may be at its infancy, but can be seen growing swiftly altogether. The unreal on-line world is becoming more enticing and real to the tech savvy youth, but has turned into an estranging world for the rest.

KEYWORDS: Dispersed Individuals, Advanced Technology and Animation

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INTRODUCTION

From a worldwide view,, Socio -economic factors may be responsible for the digital divide but the inevitability of a digital future looms before us, and this cannot be ignored. The Twenty-first century is all about connectivity and going online. The rise of digital technology has created a rift between the two generations. The ones born into the digital world are surrounded with digital technology and they are at ease with various forms of technology. Computer games, instant texting, browsing are all an integral part of their lives. From the home environment, to academic circle, from schools to universities, internet became the center for all kinds of communication. Those of us, who are not born into this digital age, are fascinated with this ubiquitous environment and often try to adopt and adapt to this new technology.

The terms "Digital Natives" and "Digital Immigrants" coined by Marc Prensky in his essay helps us to understand these users of new technology and their perspectives. The key to understanding them would be to know their technology. These digital natives like to stay connected all the time. The thin line between real space and virtual worlds are often blurred. They collaborate creatively and believe in sharing their experiences with the

world (Prensky, Marc). Perpetually connected, they often exhibit FOMO, a symptom which according to Linda Sapadin is a form of mental health syndrome (Sapadin, Linda). It is a compulsive concern that one might miss an opportunity or satisfying event, often aroused by posts seen on social media websites. Teens with FOMO are highly anxious that “everyone’s” chatting about a facebook post and they were the last to know. Or, “everyone’s” hanging out at a party house and they were excluded. These digital natives rely on narratives and storytelling mode of knowledge sharing and are responsible for the rise in digital literature and the digital publishing.

With the advent of digital technology, there was a rise in the demand for engaging content, which could be easily accessed and shared. Digital natives soon turned into creators and consumers of this electronic literature. This then led to revolution in the digital publishing arena, where writers and readers took matters into their own hands and unlocked the possibility of self-publishing and open digital platforms. Amazon created an eBooks publishing platform, where writers did not have to depend on agents, publishers and distributors. They could publish their work on the Amazon Kindle platform (Hall, Brian S). Free digital communities like Wattpad, Figment and Movella gave writers tremendous freedom to publish their works online and also to interact with their reader’s and fellow writers as well. The Advanced technology gave online users multiple tools, and means to transmit data instantly. These platforms became the site for social exchange among teenagers and young adults.

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Apps and the Trends in Publishing

The rise in mobile reading, has contributed to the surge in the number of e-reading devices and apps, available online for download. This change also had an impact in the publishing industry. There is a decline in the physical space for books and a growth in the digital space for reading. With diverse eBook readers and other apps entering the market, there has been a noticeable shift from traditional reading to digital reading experiences.

Digital publishing has empowered authors somewhat and they have realized the possibility of publishing worldwide instantly, without the interference of the middle person. Bookselling monopolies were broken by eBooks and self – publishing. This so called Publishing revolution began with Amazon. Amazon made it possible for writers to publish their works on Amazon. It has a dedicated eBook publishing platform called the Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP), which allows authors to publish on their platform. Along with the Kindle device, one can also download the kindle app, for viewing the books. Once you create a kindle publishing account, Amazon takes you through a step by step guide to publishing your book. What makes this even simpler is the fact that Amazon is flexible, when it comes to file formats. Anything from pdf, epub or even the docx format is acceptable. Apple too is seen to follow Amazon’s footsteps, with its iBook. Here too once you set up an account, you can submit your books for publishing. But for authors who are not serious about publishing, there are several free communities like Wattpad, and Fan fiction, that allows authors to publish their content online. Stories available on these communities can be accessed on multiple devices, once the app is downloaded.

Digital Communities and Online Stories

Twenty first century spelt the death of publishing monopoly, with the advent of self-publishing and digital storytelling. This change was massive in terms of digital output and online transaction. It became a convenient device for the young population. It opened up a share based interactional system, which supported collaborative work. It opened up the possibility of chapters being written by multiple users, of incomplete and abandoned stories being recreated, sometimes edited by other writers or users. There is constant interaction between the fans who are authors themselves, and the original author who keeps in touch with their fan based peer groups constantly. Online open platforms give their users a flexible medium for constructing their narratives. They provide the opportunity to authors and aspirant writers to communicate private thoughts and specific ideas using a wide range of multimodal techniques, which increases the possibility to replicate one's own thoughts through images and videos and create a sameness of experience for the readers and thereby enhance the stories. There are various digital platforms which encourage group storytelling like, Ficly, Fabulate and Figment, each with its own specific rules about the mode of story insertion. Ficly at first glance seems to be more of snippet filler, rather than a collaborative storytelling site. Fabulate is another popular site which is very particular about themes. Here writers can contribute chapters, introduce incidents or events, but effort must be taken to maintain the scenario.

One of the most popular online storytelling communities like Wattpad, also provide users with a downloadable application, which can easily be installed on androids as well as on apple devices. This App allow the users to save offline, thousands of stories, onto a virtual bookshelf, easily customizable. Here the generic stories depend on the interest level of readers, their personal preferences, as well as on their socio cultural environment. Wattpad is a free and open community which contains popular genres and millions of stories which can be downloaded and read offline. It is highly flexible as it allows users to write, critique, co-author and edit. Wattpad encourages open and direct feedbacks as well as suggestions from readers to authors. Such open platforms allow the authors to save their stories as they write them, uploading individual chapters according to their convenience. Each chapter is followed by an author's note which informs the reader's about the subsequent chapter upload. Here stories are constructed around the audience, offering them a comfortable contact zone for interaction, where the audience is notified about story updates, editing and copyright issues as well as feedbacks and votes. The push notifications feature and The Inline commenting feature in Wattpad generates and perpetuates an active fandom within the chapters of the story, where the fans as well as other authors comment on the storyline, characters and even on the language employed by the author (Bacon, Beth). Fans and active readers are sometimes also invited to design the cover pages and take part in mock interviews with the characters in the story. Once the story is read, the reader can remove the story from their bookshelf or archive for later use. The only drawback for such collaborative online writing would be the copyright issues. Digital natives love sharing, and some do not understand and take seriously the exclusive rights. In digital communities like Wattpad, it is nearly impossible to stop authors from stealing from other authors. Often plots and story segments are copied. In some cases, they are modified to prevent detection and in such cases, it is hard to spot and prevent plagiarism, especially when such online communities offer content that is free and online and completely unmonitored.

Young people these days, participate in online conversation and navigate social networks, creating for themselves a digital identity, which then becomes the center for their online social interactions. Such virtual communities and the online social relationships have increased over the past few years and the levels of intensity of such interactions depend of

the social characteristics of the users. However, what cannot be denied is the superiority of multimedia over traditional texts. Visualization enhances the stories and makes them appealing to the youngsters. It has been observed that as most of the young users belong to the 'All time Screen time' generation, and they respond better to information and knowledge given to them online. They are digital masters who excel at manipulating their immediate environment to suit their purpose. These days they ping, tag, archive, create hypertext links, and also snapchat. They bond with technology far more easily, managing virtual relations and friendship than with real life events. They create a network across the globe irrespective of nationality, race and gender.

Digital Storytelling

Digital Storytelling Association (2002) elaborates on digital storytelling as "... the modern expression of the ancient art of storytelling... using digital media to create media-rich stories to tell, to share, and to preserve. Digital stories derive their power through weaving images, music, narrative, and voice together, thereby giving deep dimension and vivid color to characters, situations, and insights" (qtd. in Digital Storytelling Resources).

Evolution in media has significantly created fascinating digital formats, which powerfully deliver stories using several technologies all at once. The users make use of the various audio and video editing softwares available on the net, to record their stories along with pictures and videos. There are apps and softwares that help customize these stories. It is still both textual as well as performative, like the traditional stories, but the digital platforms and the apparatus' used for its creation has redefined storytelling. Here the multimedia environment mediates to enhance the whole experience of e-stories. Unfettered by the spatial constraint, digital stories are more about reading to understand as well as relate, which then reconstructs their understanding about texts.

The elements of digital storytelling are slightly different from traditional stories. Even before fixing the topic for the story, one has to keep in mind the two parallel processes, first the writing process, where one would have to fix the perspective and the second, being the construction stage, where audio mixing and soundtracks are added along with images and narration (B. Bacon).

Digital storytelling has transformed the teaching-learning experience, from a linear mono directional to an interactive learning environment. Digital storytelling all about storytelling through the use of multimedia and one gets to choose from hundreds of tools and apps available online for story creation.

CONCLUSIONS

Storytelling has always been an integral part of our lives. Stories exist in various forms, as cave drawings, and digital stories. Stories began as visual stories, painted on walls of the caves. They even existed as hieroglyphics, which disclosed the mysteries of ancient civilization. Later language acquisition transformed these visual stories into an oral practice, with stories being carried forth across the oceans by word of mouth. Narratives have always enchanted us. It is in our nature to tell stories and this remains unchanged even today. With technological advancements, storytelling experience has undergone a major transformation. It marks a shift to a visual mode of storytelling.

Stories have the power to transform and enlighten us and therefore they are powerful tools for teaching and instruction. Online platforms and digital storytelling encourages new and divergent thinking and familiarizes them with a new kind of literacy, one that is digital and collaborative. Digital natives learn to use digital resources effectively to create new forms of knowledge. This digital interactivity may be at its infancy, but can be seen growing swiftly altogether.

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